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JFK and a Tribute to TV

For personal and professional reasons, I was determined not to watch any of the Kennedy remembrances to be telecast in connection with the Nov. 22 anniversary of the assassination.

Personally, like everyone of age then, I have vivid memories of it and have recalled them often enough in years since. I saw no reason to exhume them once more on another artificial milestone. What difference does it make that it's now been 25 years, instead of 10 or 20, and what else can be added to the torrent of broadcast, film and print retrospective analyses that have been produced in the quarter century since Dallas?

Professionally, I approached the outpouring of television specials with apprehension and a feeling of distaste, especially given the sorry television record of late. In the recent presidential campaign, I thought network political coverage had been superficial at best and deplorable at worse. Besides, television in the Geraldo Rivera/Morton Downey Jr. era of tawdry sensationalism has demonstrated a taste for exploitation and a penchant for outrage and insult as selling devices in presenting entertainment in the form of news. The Kennedy assassination, with its obvious opportunity to reexamine the public and private questions surrounding the life and death of John F. Kennedy, offered an inviting target for more of the same.

I was wrong. Personal intentions and professional reservations notwithstanding, I did begin watching the Kennedy anniversary programs starting a week ago with CBS' documentary "Four Days in November" narrated by Dan Rather and concluding Tuesday night with NBC's special, "JFK: That Day in November," narrated by Tom Brokaw. In between, I saw much of the 30 hours the networks devoted to retelling the Kennedy story.

It was memorable in all respects, powerful if not overpowering, and an example of what television at its best can achieve. And the best, by far, was reviewing what television had actually broadcast 25 years ago from the moment the sound of those bullets rang out over the Kennedy motorcade passing through Dealey Plaza.

The point has been made many times that television not only came of age with the Kennedy assassination; television also provided the means for the nation to survive its most traumatic

event since Abraham Lincoln's murder a century earlier. That judgment seems even more secure after reexamining the way television performed then. Its coverage was dignified, remarkably calm and professional, especially given the shocking events occurring so swiftly and confoundingly. It permitted everyone, everywhere, to participate intimately in the event, to grieve, to share information, to come to terms with what had happened, to begin the process of attempting to accept the unacceptable. It was majestic. It held the nation together.

All these, of course, were matters of considerable historical importance then. If the 25th anniversary coverage did nothing more than remind the nation of these facts, it was well worth every moment. But the special programming provided another, and greater, public service.

It has been argued, in this space and elsewhere, that the television age has spawned a generation of Americans without a sense of history. Not surprisingly, considering the nature of the medium, the constraints of time and the demands for live visual scenes under which commercial it labors, television is preoccupied with conveying a sense of immediacy. Its focus is upon today, now, not yesterday or tomorrow. It highlights individual personality and dramatic action, not complex issues and historical forces. As a result, television certainly contributes to the lack of perspective about past events that I believe fairly characterizes Americans today.

What television has just provided, through the Kennedy documentaries, is a remarkable history lesson. It not only retold the Kennedy assassination story that so profoundly affected the course of national and international events since Nov. 22, 1963. It permitted millions then unborn to "live" it, and thus to have a greater understanding of the forces that continue to influence American life today.

It also gave those watching an opportunity to form their own impressions about Kennedy and distinguish between myth and reality. The Kennedy I saw, all these years later, was compellingly human and refreshingly spontaneous. He clearly needed no media-handler filters to help him reach the public.

For those of us who admired Kennedy, the televised retelling stirred fresh thoughts of what might have been. It also showed us what television can—and should—be.